

December 24, 1962

Dear Jack:

Edman

Apart from this being the holiday season, I've had a distinct nostalgia for some of our long-ago communications: mostly this is the backwash of a meeting I attended in London, in equal parts the thinking along currently unfamiliar lines I had to do in preparing my paper and a confrontation with Huxley (Julian) at the meeting itself. Unfortunately, Muller had lumbago and though scheduled could not come; Bronowski and Szent-Gyorgy were about equally mischievous; very happily, Crick was there too, and in very good form. Much of the time I felt that Huxley (Aldous) would have done better all by himself than the pack of us put together, though he would have had to resurrect his sensible criticism of the 30's and play down his more recent noöspheric (as Julian would now call it) nonsense (as I do.)

I don't know whether to resent or applaud having taken this assignment; the whole symposium was probably a frivolous whim, as was my original acceptance. But I had not hitherto been thinking very much about the technological crisis in biology and accordingly had no thought how ill prepared we were. Like most I had overlooked "euphenics" -- but you can see this well enough from the paper.

The crisis is not only a political one, but not unrelatedly, a philosophical one. Brave New World comes close enough to the mark. The point is the imminent realization, in respect of many details, that man is a machine not only as a metaphysical abstraction but as an engineering program. Possessed of this kind of power, it is more important than ever that we have a clearer idea what man is for, and even before that, what man is. My main quarrel with Huxley was on this point, that his brand of "scientific evolutionary humanism" which pleads for human "fulfillment" as the basic ethical axiom, has no definition of man. He was one of the first to point out how psychosocial evolution has replaced biological, but he still seems to cling to genetic continuity (~~xxx~~ rather than conceptual) to define the favored people. There are other absurdities in his position, partly covered up by the confusion between humanitarianism and this technical humanism; and I had to record a profound disagreement with his proposal to push a eugenical program by advertising ~~the~~ Huxley-equivalents as genotypic sources in artificial insemination -- mainly on considerations of priority and common sense.

On a short term basis, I would like to see more thoughtful insights than Aubrey Menen (Fig Tree; Shela) on the euphenic problem, so that some sort of program can be put together for the sensible use of dangerous knowledge. Over a longer range, the definition of man does strike me as one of our crucial problems -- I think we might not suffer too badly giving way to ~~dephix~~ dolphins, computers and extra-terrestrials, if this also helps us cope with the other monsters of our own creation. I am not ~~at~~ all unsympathetic to Vercors' approach ("And You Shall Know Them"). If I may approach you as a professor of literary criticism, what would you recommend to me by way of treatments of this problem, and critiques of the treatments, and so forth? Did Capek cap it off too well?

EDMAN

I haven't thought much about technical metaphysics for years (like most scientists) and am not too vain to show how rusty I am. You may see a thread of this in the paper; more and more I am impressed by the extent to which Science is a social phenomenon rather than one of private insight. We long ago gave up trying to assimilate all that was already (i.e. socially) 'known', and yet still make great efforts to augment that legacy. This would incline me to answer Descartes "I think, therefore someone has taught me how to speak, formulate abstract concepts, experience verbal imagery; i.e., I think, therefore there is a tradition of thinking to which I am a party and heir. Surely the one common ground of all philosophy is verbal expression, and I am surprised (not to be aware) more has not been made of this as an alternative to eclecticism. /To whom would you direct me for the development of this theme of- what shall I call it - cultural idealism; that reality is not a private idea but the idea of my cultural tradition, from which I learn all the means of knowledge. Put another way, reality is the rule of communication within a culture, (in precisely the same sense that it was Berkeley's individual idea.)/

Do you ever have any occasion to visit the West Coast? I hope we might see you here sometime. I am desperately trying to cut down on my tripping, but if some occasion does intersect Philadelphia, it will be fun to look in on you; and I am hoping to meet your wife too.

Some of my old friends have been alarmed at seeing me; I hope you won't be-- having lost almost 100 pounds of surplus avoirdupois, quite voluntarily, I am amused often not to be recognized. Weightwise, this also sends me back to the earliest days of our youthful friendship.

All best wishes, and happy new year too

Joshua Lederberg

P.S. Does the expression "Beehive World" convey anything to you?

P.P.S. If you wait to collect answers to all my questions, I'll never hear from you

P³S. Did you publish your Wyndham Lewis opus?

// I probably don't mean this part, but have yet to frame what I do mean. ^{Mostly}
I do feel that the "ego" implicit in "sum" is learned; but not only from
the social tradition.